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### Narratives of transformation

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## Narratives of Transformation: Religious Conversion and Indian Traditions of 'Life Writing'

### 1. Introduction

This special issue focuses on Indian 'life writings' to examine the ways in which the conversion experience has been remembered and narrated in the Indian context, inflected by creative uses of old and emerging literary conventions of speaking about the self. The special issue examines the multiple ways by which the writing, circulation and consumption of narratives of transformed lives helped to redefine individual and collective identities in South Asia. The articles examine autobiographical narratives to emphasize the importance of not just what about transformation is remembered but *how* it is remembered; and to what purpose altered lives are remembered and re-constructed textually.

What traditions of writing about the 'self' have developed in the Indian literary traditions? And how have these been put to use by Indians writing about their conversion experiences? It appears that a wide variety of literary genres have been used to speak about religious conversion in the various religious traditions: from the *Therigatha*, the 'inspired utterances' of Buddhist nuns celebrating their experience of religious transformation in the third century B.C.E. South Asia,<sup>1</sup> to medieval Tamil and Marathi bhakti poetry and later to modern prose narratives in a range of modern Indian languages. In the introduction, we intentionally use the broader category 'life writing' to indicate the wide range of overlapping textual genres that the different contributions examine. Individual contributors focus on specific forms of life writing (Frenz, Israel, Singh) or indeed refer to the patchwork of expressive timbres drawn from several literary forms into a single text (Martinez, Mukherji), and at times combining devotional poetic genres with prose (Dandekar), to re-construct transformed lives and in particular to narrate the experience of religious conversion. This special issue thus explores the tension between the assumed sincerity in introspecting inner transformation and the artifice of constructing narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hallisey, Introduction, *Therigatha: Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, Cambridge, London: Murty Classical Library of India, 2015, pp., vii-xxxv.

## 2. Conversion

At the heart of the special issue is the act of conversion and its representation. Baldly, we may identify conversion as the movement of the subject from one religion to another, or from one religious status to another. Although such a statement may seem straightforward, it carries with it a whole set of social, political and psychological complexities. What form of 'movement' is signified? How does one make a transition 'between' religions? How are boundaries located and conceptualised? Is the movement 'between' religions qualitatively different to the movement into a specific religious status, from a more generalised or even non-religious status? How is the authenticity of these moves measured? All these questions are generated by the initial identification of conversion as an act of the subject. Even this idea of the agential act of the subject, however, is open to question. Both academic and non-academic accounts frequently represent conversion as the result of relations of power in which the subject is, precisely, subjected.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly pertinent in the context of the colonial and postcolonial world, where the work of evangelical Christian missionaries is frequently projected as a paradigm of cultural domination, representative of a totalizing evisceration of the colonized mind.<sup>3</sup> As this suggests, conversion in such contexts has developed a significance beyond the boundaries of the autonomous subject, wherever these may lie, and this is certainly the case in postcolonial India, where conversion has developed a deep and far-reaching political resonance. In this section we will consider some of these issues, in order to place in perspective the ways in which conversion has been narrated as an act of the self in the context of autobiographical writing – the focus of the following section.

The 'field' of conversion – encompassing transformations of affiliation, practice, articulation, ideas and belief associated with religious traditions – has a very long history in the Indian context, but there is no doubt that the issue has developed a particular political

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<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Roberts, 'Is conversion a "colonization of consciousness"?', *Anthropological Theory* 12(3): 2012 p. 271–294, p. 274-7

<sup>3</sup> See J.L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff (1992) 'Colonization of consciousness'. In: *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992; see also Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, p. 32: 'The Church in the colonies is the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor.'

edge in the contemporary era.<sup>4</sup> Since the late 1990s, it has become a regular source of tension and political violence across many parts of India.<sup>5</sup> In Uttar Pradesh the Hindu Yuva Vahini, an organization established by Yogi Adityanath,<sup>6</sup> has been increasingly energetic in opposing what it sees as the conversion activities of Christian missionaries in the state.<sup>7</sup> In Jharkhand, as in other parts of India, programmes of *shuddhikaran* (purification) and *ghar wapsi* (homecoming) have been organized by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its offshoot organisations, as a means to effect what it sees as the ‘re-Hinduisation’ of groups previously ‘lost’ to other religions, particularly Islam and Christianity.<sup>8</sup> As we shall see, these combative, sometimes violent forms of cultural politics have in fact been an active element of the Indian political landscape for some time, but the rising fortunes of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its eventual coming to power as a majority government with the hard-edged Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in 2014, has escalated both activity and rhetoric around the issue of conversion.

The political profile of conversion also has a legal dimension. Five States of the Republic of India now have active legislation outlawing conversion by force, allurement or fraudulent means, and several others are close to following suit.<sup>9</sup> The legislation is rooted in Article 25 of the Indian Constitution, which stipulates freedom of religion as a Fundamental Right: ‘Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion.’<sup>10</sup> Although it may appear counterintuitive, this

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<sup>4</sup> For a transhistorical and cross-tradition perspective on this issue, see Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke (eds), *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations and Meanings*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> For accounts of this development, see, amongst others, Chad Bauman, ‘Hindu-Christian Conflict in India: Globalization, Conversion, and the Coterminal Castes and Tribes’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 72 (3): 2013, pp. ; Roberts, ‘Is conversion a “colonization of consciousness”?’; John Zavos, ‘Conversion and the Assertive Margins: an analysis of Hindu nationalist discourse and the recent attacks on Indian Christians’, *South Asia*, 24 (2): 2001, pp.

<sup>6</sup> Yogi Adityanath is a guru-politician who is head of the Goraknath Math in Gorakhpur, eastern Uttar Pradesh. Having been an MP in the Lok Sabha since 1998, Adityanath has gone on to become Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh as of 2017.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/in-gorakhpur-cops-halt-church-prayer-after-hindu-group-alleges-conversion/story-EBbeOl71ckLuIPyQzx3ksL.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/rss-53-families-converted-hindus-jharkhand-christianity-free/1/926251.html>

<sup>9</sup> The five states are: Odisha, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Himachal Pradesh. Rajasthan and Arunachal Pradesh both have legislation which has yet to be full enacted.

<sup>10</sup> <http://lawmin.nic.in/olwing/coi/coi-english/coi-4March2016.pdf>

Article has been interpreted to chime with anti-conversion legislation by casting conversion as an activity primarily conducted through forms of inducement and force. In this context, then, the act of conversion is envisaged not so much as an autonomous step towards personal realisation, but rather as an infringement of that person – a denial of individual rights under the protection of the constitution. This in itself demonstrates the complexities that attach themselves to the idea of conversion in India. The special issue seeks to provide perspective on these contemporary complexities, to place the sometimes vicious power plays of the current era in context. How has this concept of conversion been shaped? What pressures and agencies underlie the manifestation of conversion as a deeply political and communally resonant act?

As already suggested, the politics that underpins this complex contemporary situation is strongly related to a key cultural, social and political phenomenon in modern India: Hindu nationalism<sup>11</sup>. The concept of the religious subject is a serious concern for Hindu nationalism, although at the same time the self-conscious idea of religious subjectivity – what Nate Roberts calls the beliefs and desires of individual people<sup>12</sup> – is of comparatively little interest. As an ideology, Hindu nationalism is driven by the desire to articulate a strong sense of Hindu-ness, an identity defined not by substantive dogma, but rather by practices and affiliations that mark sharp distinctions from other identities, particularly Muslim, Christian and communist. Since its inception around a century ago, the shapers of this ideology – VD Savarkar, M.S. Golwalkar, Deendayal Upadhyay and others – have consistently demonstrated a concern to represent Hindu-ness as a form of indigeneity, configured by notions of blood, culture and a valorization of the land, as much as religion. *Hindutva*, the term used to express the core ideology of this movement, self-consciously moves beyond religion to embrace the land and culture of India as the essence of Hindu-ness. In this context, converts away from Hinduism risk the hazard of being identified as ‘anti-national’, as much as they may be represented as moving away from Hinduism.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, several of the bodies of anti-conversion legislation mentioned above make this

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<sup>11</sup> Leela Fernandes argues that the secular state is also deeply complicit in violence related to conversion, although this argument also acknowledges that this positioning is rooted in an understanding of religion as related to the territorial nation in a similar manner to the Hindu right. See Fernandes, ‘Unsettled Territories: State, Civil Society and the Politics of Religious Conversion in India’, *Politics and Religion* 4: 2011, pp. 108–135

<sup>12</sup> Roberts, ‘Is conversion a “colonization of consciousness”’, p. 275

<sup>13</sup> See also Fernandes, ‘Unsettled Territories’.

association explicit, by defining conversion through indigeneity. For example, in Chhatisgarh the Act excludes 'returning to one's forefather's religion or his original religion' from the definition of conversion; in Arunachal Pradesh conversion is defined as 'renouncing an indigenous faith and adopting another faith or religion'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, it is under these circumstances that Hindu nationalist groups act with relative impunity when engaged in 'ghar vaapsi' activities which might otherwise be interpreted as a form of conversion.

Although there is intermittent traction associated with the threat of Islam, the central thrust of Hindu nationalist anxiety related to conversion (and subsequent political tension and violence) is geared towards the threat of a globally expansive Christianity associated with western powers.<sup>15</sup> This correlation is rooted in the period which forms the main focus of this special issue, the period of colonial control, when the issue of religious identity was a battleground of representation.<sup>16</sup> Christianity was, unsurprisingly, strongly associated with the incursion of European political domination, and Hindu ideas and practices were subjected to considerable critique in Christian missionary tracts.<sup>17</sup> Caste regulations were a frequent target of these critiques – a point which was regularly reflected in moments of rupture noted in autobiographical accounts by largely high caste converts during this period (see, for example, the papers by Israel, Frenz, Dandekar). The limited success of evangelising activities in the earlier part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, combined with this representation of caste as a vulnerability of Hindu society, led from the 1850s onwards to a change of strategy amongst many missionary societies, who subsequently began to focus more directly on converting marginal caste and tribal groups, combined with an increase in the provision of medical and educational services for these groups. David Hardiman<sup>18</sup> cites

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<sup>14</sup> South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre, 'Anti-conversion laws: challenges to secularism and Fundamental Rights', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (2): Jan. 12 - 18, 2008), pp. 63-73, p. 64

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, the pamphlet *Evangelisation 2000 or politics of subversion*, by P. Parameswaran (Bangalore: Sahitya Sindhu Prakashana, 1999), in which the author speculates that an alliance between Pope John Paul II and Ronald Reagan to bring down the communist government in Poland in 1990 was being recreated in the late 1990s via the conduit of Sonia Gandhi: 'is India a new target for installing an Italian Christian owing direct allegiance to Pope as Prime Minister of India...?' p. 16.

<sup>16</sup> See Zavos, 'Representing Religion in Colonial India', in E. Bloch, M. Keppens and R. Hegde (eds), *Rethinking Religion in India*, London: Routledge 2010

<sup>17</sup> See Brian Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians and the Colonial Construction of Religion*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 59 – 100.

<sup>18</sup> David Hardiman, *Missionaries and their medicine: A Christian modernity for tribal India*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2008

this strategic approach as a kind of conversion to modernity, by which missionaries saw themselves as effecting developmental change, and through this, a change of consciousness. As the medical missionary Robert Fletcher Moorshead states in 1913:

no more fatal blow can be dealt at this awful evil, cursing alike body and soul, than by proving by living demonstration the fallacy, fatuity and powerlessness of the superstitious methods of treatment employed by the medicine man. Destroy the faith of the non-Christian man in his 'doctor' and you have very frequently taken the surest and simplest course towards the destruction of his faith in the superstition of his religion.<sup>19</sup>

This evidence points towards the power relations implicit in discourses of conversion that emerged during the colonial era. As Wakankar makes clear, such interventions ensured that conversion was a key topic of debate in colonial public spheres from the later 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and that these debates provided a focus for discussion of issues such as civilisation, development, exploitation, caste and, of course, religion (see also Singh). Moorshead's approach is indicative of a missionary position which implicitly situates Christianity 'beyond religion', through its discursive correlation with technologies of modernity. The 'conversion to modernity' was an intimate correlate of the transformation of the self that Christianity promised – a transformation beyond 'superstitious' religion to the rational truths of a modern Christian life. As Wakankar argues, Hinduism in contrast is increasingly cast as 'a religion' – a 'superstitious faith', symptomatic of the 'backwardness' of Indian society which the hegemonic state projected itself as transforming through its rule. In this sense, we can understand Hindu intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as engaged in a struggle to 'make Christianity religious', to represent it as an equivalent and oppositional social form to that of indigenous forms of religiosity.

This discussion demonstrates how the emergence of a public discourse of conversion in colonial India is fundamentally significant in the shaping of ideas about what constitutes religion (see also Israel, this volume). It also demonstrates how central conflicting ideas

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in Hardiman, *Missionaries and their medicine*, 12

about caste are to these processes, and in particular the social location of marginal groups. It is a pertinent irony that many of these groups were not constrained by these emerging discursive formations, aligning or disaligning themselves according to different ideas about knowledge, power and identity (see Wakankar, Mukherjee).<sup>20</sup> Partly as a response to this different set of social logics, low caste and tribal groups came increasingly to be represented in colonial public spaces as border zones, areas of potential weakness, in an emerging conceptual mapping of Hinduism. It was through these public debates about the shape of Hinduism that the underpinning ideas of Hindu nationalism emerged.<sup>21</sup>

Conversion as a threat to Hinduism through its vulnerable border zones has remained a key element of Hindu nationalist ideology. In 1966 M.S. Golwalkar, the second *Sarsanghchalak* (leader) of the RSS, emphasised the internal threat of Christianity, which was directed at 'poor Hindu villagers, cut off from the support and succour of our indifferent Hindu Society...'.<sup>22</sup> A 1981 pamphlet by the RSS ideologue Sita Ram Goel speaks of 'Christianism...busy in the backyards' of Hindu society, concentrating on 'Hindu tribals who are removed from the main centres of Hindu population'.<sup>23</sup> Remote villages, main centres; the spatial framing of these images of evangelism and vulnerability is marked. Conversion is represented as an encroachment, effected by outside forces, echoing the encroachment of colonial control, and silently effacing both the spatial exclusions that mark the experience of marginal groups, and the claims to indigeneity that form a feature of their resistant political articulations (Wakankar, Mukherjee).<sup>24</sup> As we noted in the articulation of anti-conversion legislation in Arunachal Pradesh, indigeneity is a legitimising factor in the formulation of the law, and in this spatial dance, it is Christianity and Islam which are identified as non-indigenous, and therefore other to the idea of a totalizing, territorialised Hinduism. Nothing demonstrates this distinctive understanding more than one of the most dramatic conversion acts of modern Indian history – that of BR Ambedkar in 1956. This was a

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<sup>20</sup> See also Roberts, 'Is conversion a "colonization of consciousness"?'

<sup>21</sup> Bauman, 'Hindu-Christian Conflict in India'; Zavos, 'Conversion and the Assertive Margins'

<sup>22</sup> Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts*, Bangalore: Vikrama Prakashan, 1966, p. 180

<sup>23</sup> Goel, *Hindu Society Under Siege*, New Delhi, Voice of India 1981, pp. 16-17

<sup>24</sup> It is not just Hindu nationalist ideologues that have expressed this antagonism towards Christian 'busy-ness' in the 'backyards' of Hinduism. M.K. Gandhi is one amongst many public figures who have shown a marked sensitivity towards missionary activities amongst low castes and tribals. See, for example, Susan Billington Harper, *In the shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the travails of Christianity in British India*, Richmond: Curzon, 2000, pp. 314 - 7



carefully prepared and staged political act of resistance against Hindu domination, a very public assertion of low caste consciousness, which inspired millions more similar conversions, particularly by members of Ambedkar's dalit caste, Mahar. But Ambedkar's decision to convert to Buddhism, represented in the logics of Hindutva as an indigenous tradition, meant that its political resonance was comparatively muted. Ambedkar has, ironically, since sometimes been appropriated as an icon of Hindutva by Hindu nationalist groups, with Prime Minister Modi proclaiming himself an 'Ambedkar *bhakt*' whilst laying the foundation stone of the Ambedkar National Memorial in Delhi in 2016.<sup>25</sup> For these groups, this shift from one form of indigenous culture to another is not perceived as encroachment; it is, in this sense, and counterintuitively, not conversion.

Clustered around the idea of conversion, then, are a complex mesh of representations; images of colonial subjugation and postcolonial resistance, and fundamental concepts of religious and caste identity are entangled in acts of subjecthood which also reflect the messy engagements of personal lives marked, as many of the papers in this issue show, by family pressures, personal relationships and local political dynamics. Conversion is a layered representational moment, requiring, as Bauman notes, 'an interactive, "nodal" approach that respects the "webby" interconnectedness of religion and broader cultural, social, and even biological and technological realities'.<sup>26</sup> This special issue is an intervention in this 'webby' field. Our intention is to explore the representational layering that constitutes conversion activity as a modern social act. As Bauman and others have noted, unpacking this complexity is a methodological challenge.<sup>27</sup> Our contention is that the analysis of life writing is a significant methodological trajectory for understanding this act, and it is to an exploration of this form that we now turn.

### 3. Life writing in South Asia

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<sup>25</sup> See <https://www.indiatvnews.com/politics/national-narendra-modi-live-br-ambedkar-memorial-lecture-320233>

<sup>26</sup> Bauman, 'Hindu-Christian Conflict in India', p. 635

<sup>27</sup> See also Gavin Irby, 'A Conviction to Dissent: Reinterpreting Mass Conversion at Meenakshipuram', *Virginia Review of Asian Studies*, 2005, see [virginiareviewofasianstudies.com/files/archives/2005/gavin\\_irby.doc](http://virginiareviewofasianstudies.com/files/archives/2005/gavin_irby.doc)

Religious conversion in South Asia has been studied within various disciplines: Anthropology, History, Mission Studies, Gender Studies, and Religious Studies. However, analyses of personal narratives of conversion seldom feature prominently in these works. Scholars of mission studies have viewed conversion autobiographies as ‘evidence’ of and as products of conversion rather than as starting points for the analysis of how conversion is represented. Historians have examined life writings to explain causes of conversion.<sup>28</sup> Religious studies scholars studying conversion have mainly focused on the long history of religious conflict and contestation over traditions and practices in the Indian context rather than on literary narratives representing the experience of religious conversion. While several cultural and social historians have examined conversion narratives to offer groundbreaking analyses of the formation of particular social or intellectual movements,<sup>29</sup> their focus (understandably) has not been on the mechanics of (re)constructions of the ‘self’ through narrative and the ideological purposes these may serve. This volume adds significantly to the current scholarship by paying attention to the literary characteristics of conversion narratives, that is, to the conventions of writing, the intricacies of narration, the inflections of language registers employed and to translation. Our point is not to treat these literary aspects as physiognomies that can be set aside (or at best appreciated as ingenuous aesthetic qualities), but to consider them as constituent elements in the project of the construction of a self and one’s social history. By showing *how* the different writers write about, engage with or even ‘pose’<sup>30</sup> particular selfhoods, the contributors to this volume open up stimulating ways of investigating the connections between ‘individuals,’ ‘conversion’ and the social and historical frameworks with which they interacted.

Life writing has had a significant presence in the literary traditions of South Asia. We deliberately use the expansive category ‘life writing’ in the introduction in order to reiterate the porous lines between textual categories such as biography, autobiography, history, hagiography, life story, ego documents or self-narratives; this also had the additional advantage of giving contributors freedom to interpret and challenge or assign categories to

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<sup>28</sup> Antony Copley, ‘The conversion experience of India’s Christian Elite in the mid-nineteenth century,’ *The Journal of Religious History*, 18 (1): 1994, pp. 52-74.

<sup>29</sup> Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Kali for Women, 1998; Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-1920*, Ashgate 2005.

<sup>30</sup> See in particular Martinez, this volume.

the texts they were working on. Despite the rich history of life writing in South Asia, the study of life writing in the Indian context has remained limited, with isolated scholars pointing out that Indian traditions of autobiography differ from Western autobiographical traditions. Until recently, just a handful of articles<sup>31</sup> and an edited volume,<sup>32</sup> on South Asian life writing have pointed out that most narratives blur distinctions between history, biography and autobiography. Welcome additions to the existing scholarship on autobiography, addressing the issue of genre and the difficulties of labelling South Asian life writing are Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley's *Speaking of the Self*,<sup>33</sup> examining gendered performances of the self, Udaya Kumar's *Writing the First Person*,<sup>34</sup> focusing on autobiographies written in Malayalam, and Katheryn Hansen's work on autobiographies relating to Indian theatre.<sup>35</sup> The thrust of this scholarship has been to argue that Indian traditions of life writing do not celebrate the autonomous individual or examine the sensibilities of an interior consciousness in the same way as is claimed of the western autobiographical tradition. Whether this is the case or not, and to what extent, is too complex a question to engage with here, since this is not the main focus of this volume, but there is little doubt that life writing in South Asia has a long tradition in hagiography and in sacred and political biographies.

In the Buddhist tradition, the memory of past lives is one of the Buddha's three accomplishments indicative of enlightenment attained.<sup>36</sup> Early Buddhist texts that narrate the past selves of the Buddha to suggest the process of rebirth carefully construct a narrative voice that moves between the first and third person, in complex multi-level

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<sup>31</sup> Phyllis Granoff, *Monks and Magicians: Religious Biographies in Asia*, Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1988, 'Remembrance of Past Births in Jain Religious Narratives, in Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara ed. *Other Selves: Autobiography and biography in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1994); Udaya Kumar (2008, 2009); Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, 'Life/History/Archive: Identifying autobiographical Writing by Muslim Women in south Asia, *Journal of Women's History* ( 25, 2,2013) pp.61-84 A.R. Venkatachalapathy, 'Excising the Self: Writing Autobiography in Colonial Tamilnadu, in *In those Days there was no Coffee*, New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006, pp. 163-

<sup>32</sup> Arnold and Blackburn, eds. *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life History*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia*, ed. Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, Duke University Press, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> *Writing the First Person: Literature, History and Autobiography in Modern Kerala*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black in association with Ashoka University, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies*, Anthem, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Carl Olson ed., *Original Buddhist Sources: A Reader*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 2005. P. 17.

narratives.<sup>37</sup> Such remembering and recounting of past lives are central to both Buddhist and Jain traditions, where remembering past good actions may lead an individual in the present to furthering their good behaviour in this life. Further, remembering the experience of suffering as a consequence of past bad actions can lead a person to resolve to do better or a memory that challenges a person's current lifestyle may lead to a transformation, even a renunciation of worldly life altogether.<sup>38</sup> Likewise in the Jain tradition, Granoff argues that a saint's biography functions as autobiography, its didactic story experienced as one's own, when the audience are moved to recollect their own past life within an "autobiographical encounter".<sup>39</sup> This rich lineage of the narrative construction and interpretation of Buddhist and Jain recollections of previous lives reveals just how complex the relationship between biography and autobiography has been in the sacred setting.

In later historical periods, medieval sufi and bhakti poetry, composed in several Indian languages, extolled the lives of gods and poet-saints in verse, expressing personal devotion and loyalty. These also include poems of conversion, such as the Tamil Saivite Appar's, famously celebrating his conversion back to Saivism after having first left it to become a Jaina monk.<sup>40</sup> A further wave of medieval life writing can be identified in the histories, memoirs, autobiographies and biographies that the Mughals authored, introducing life writing traditions from the Middle East and Central Asia through the *Baburnama*, *Akbarnama* and *Jehangirnama*. Among these, Jahanara Begum's *Risalah-i Sahibiyah* remarkably cultivated an aura of "her spiritual subjectivity," combining her Mughal imperial persona with "personalised ruminations of her spiritual development in response to significant historical and socio-political events".<sup>41</sup> In the same period when these political memoirs were authored in the elite Persian, Banarasidas, a seventeenth-

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<sup>37</sup> Sarah Shaw, 'And that Was I: How the Buddha Himself Creates a Path between Biography and Autobiography,' in *Lives Lived, Lives Imagined: Biography in the Buddhist Traditions*, ed. by Inda Covill, Ulrike Roesler and Sarah Shaw, Wisdom Publications, 2010, pp. 15-48.

<sup>38</sup> Naomi Appleton, *Narrative Karma and Rebirth: Buddhist and Jain Multi-Life Stories*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, p.

<sup>39</sup> Phyllis Granoff, 'This was my life: Autobiographical narrative and renunciation in medieval Jainism,' *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 75 (1/4): 1994, pp. 25-50.

<sup>40</sup> For English translations of Appar's autobiographical poems celebrating his conversion Saivism, see Indira Viswanathan Peterson, 'Appar: The Reformed Monk' in *Poems to Siva: The Hymns of the Tamil Saints*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 283-301.

<sup>41</sup> Afshan Bokhari, 'Masculine Modes of Female Subjectivity: The Case of Jehanara Begum,' in Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley ed. *Speaking the Self*, pp. 165-202.

century Jain merchant writing in Hindi, also left a detailed account of his life commenting on, among a range of concerns, his spiritual transformation towards the end.<sup>42</sup> Equally, South Asian Muslims have written about their conversion to other faiths, as Anshu Malhotra's recent book on the early nineteenth-century Piro's autobiographical verse fragments illustrates very well. Malhotra argues that the courtesan Piro projects her move from a Muslim to a neophyte in the Gulabdasi dera (broadly defined as Sikh), a theatrical story of abduction and rescue, in terms of an allegory of Sita's rescue by Ram.<sup>43</sup> And finally, biographical and autobiographical narratives introduced to South Asia after European contact included translated religious auto/biographies (the life of Christ or lives of saints translated by missionaries), or the allegorical novel such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, recommended reading as an archetypal tale of spiritual conversion,<sup>44</sup> as well as life writings by European public figures.<sup>45</sup> It has been argued that the British in India, not just the significant governor generals and civil servants but the more ordinary, such as soldiers, memsahibs and travellers, perceived their life stories as worthy of public attention because their lives were played out in India as part of the British empire.<sup>46</sup> The circulation of this variety of life writings, in original and in translation, was much wider in the nineteenth century than ever before in India with the greater availability of print, thereby promoting the prose narrative as the most appropriate literary form for self-examination. It is no wonder that so many Indian men and women from the nineteenth century onwards adopted this prose literary form to explore a number of political, social, spiritual and domestic issues that concerned them.

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<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of his spiritual concerns see Paul Dundas, *The Jains*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 192-195 and Chloe Martinez, 'Gathering the Threads: Religious Autobiography in Pre-colonial South Asia,' *The Medieval History Journal*, 18 (2): 2015, pp. 250-277; for a discussion on his literary handling of Hindi verse and the autobiographical mode, see Rupert Snell, 'Confessions of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Jain Merchant: The *Ardhakathanak* of Banarasidas,' *South Asia Research*, 25 (1): 2005, 79-104.

<sup>43</sup> Anshu Malhotra, *Piro and the Gulabdasīs: Gender, Sect and Society in Punjab*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> A key 'Christian' text translated into several Indian languages. For instance, translated into Tamil at least four times between 1793 and 1910 with titles such as *Paratēciyin Payanam* (1793) and *Oru paratēci ... carittiram* (1826); translations into Hindi (*Yatra-svapnodaya* 1867), Malayalam (*paradesi-moksa-yatra* 1847 and *Sancariyute prayanam* 1869), Marathi, *Yātrikakramana ihalokāpāsūna paralokāsa hem svapracarupakāneka thilem ase* (1841) and Telugu were also published.

<sup>45</sup> E.g. biographies of Europeans such as John Stuart Mill, Napoléon Bonaparte and Robert Clive were translated into Bengali in the second half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>46</sup> Mary A. Procida, "'The greater part of my life has been spent in India': Autobiography and the crisis of empire in the twentieth century,' *Biography*, 25 (1) 2002: pp. 130-150.

On the whole, discussions of South Asian life narratives tend to focus on those written by Indian writers of historical and/or political significance<sup>47</sup> rather than on how individuals have remembered and narrated their transformation from one faith or religious practice to another. And yet, as we have shown, religious transformation has been an intrinsic part of the history of life writing over different historical periods. In fact, the trope of spiritual transformation or conversion has been so powerful that as Arnold and Blackburn point out, some life stories of political and public figures take the form of ‘conversion narratives’ common to stories of bhakti saints, which entail a moment of revelation or renunciation that transforms the life totally and routes it in a different direction.<sup>48</sup> The conversion narrative, therefore, requires further and sustained attention in the modern Indian literary context. This collection of essays aims at making a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on Indian life writings by approaching it from the intersecting perspectives of religious conversion, the genres of life writing and translation.

The contributors to this issue focus attention on practices and functions of the conversion account as constituent and constitutive *narrative* acts which regulate the boundaries between the personal, the social and the political. The articles investigate the ‘translation’ of individuals across competing sacred borders yet call attention to multiple self-identifications and heterogeneous interests underpinning these tellings. Several contributors to the volume examine how narrative experiences of personal ‘translation’ from one faith to another are distinctly shaped by the range of linguistic registers available to individuals at the time of writing. The exteriorized self is fully transformed at the intersection of the language of religious convention and idioms of social belonging: each of the narratives discussed display that the pressing into and crossing over of religious boundaries is compellingly indicated in the pushing against the limits of language. What is

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<sup>47</sup> Stephen Dale, ‘Poetry and Autobiography,’ *The Garden of the Eight Paradise: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and India (1483-1530)*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004, pp. 247-289; Taymiya Zaman, ‘Instructive Memory: An Analysis of Auto/Biographical Writing in Early Mughal India,’ *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 54 (5): 2011, 677-700; Milton Israel, ‘Indian Nationalist Voices: Autobiography and the Process of Return,’ in *Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory*, ed. George Egerton, London: Frank Cass, 1994, pp. 76-105. Although Majeed examines autobiographical narratives of key Indian public intellectuals and political figures such as Gandhi and Nehru, he also takes into account spiritual dimensions of Gandhi’s engagement with autobiography, see Chapter 7, ‘Gandhi, ‘Truth’ and Translatability,’ in *Autobiography, Travel and Postnational Identity: Gandhi, Nehru and Iqbal*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 239-268.

<sup>48</sup> Arnold and Blackburn, pp. 14.

also analysed for the first time is how the translation of some autobiographies into English or other Indian languages helped to transform local (Bengali, Tamil or Marathi) identities to regional or national identities, such that, by speaking to different language clusters, the narrative lives of transformed men and women acquired far wider social or political significance than purely exemplary, personal salvation.

The special issue also brings into the conversation the important role of memory in constructing an image of the believing self, and the equally important force of literary and linguistic conventions that allow the foregrounding of some aspects of the self and emotional affect over others. Approaching the complex and fraught subject of religious transformation through the lens of personal narrative also offers a fresh perspective on the debate on religious conversion in South Asia from the point of view of the cultural role of memory, both individual and collective. Cultural memory operates at different levels of the active and passive (Aleida Assmann, 2008) to select specific elements from the past to represent and support collective identities. These functions of memory conversely imply those of forgetting, and both perform the role of establishing and disseminating some narratives over others, serving to build powerful meta-narratives that are self-affirming for both individuals and communities.

The texts analysed extend across a range of religious traditions. This allows the reader to read conversion statements comparatively for a more nuanced understanding of how conversion is conceived and articulated in different religious conceptions. The various forms of life writing they focus on allow the contributors to examine the links between representation of individual spiritual transformation with that of the different religious traditions involved. Such a juxtaposition of heterogeneous conversion narratives calls the reader's attention to how conversion almost always functions as an ideological battleground, where the domains of religious traditions are tested, reinforced or stretched. The conversion accounts examined in these articles display the porosity of religious boundaries and the unfixed nature of religious identities as individuals re-position themselves in relation to multiple orthodoxies.

Despite the differences in religious traditions and historical period covered, the articles reveal some overarching themes in the representation of conversion in the narratives. There is an acute awareness of changing social positions in terms of caste and gender as the process of conversion is recorded retrospectively. Equally, the performative nature of both religious conversion and life writing comes across strongly in each of the articles. Whether in autobiography, biography or hagiography, the narratives perform each life and its transformation for us. Religious conversion and belief involves the enactment of religious roles and rituals, the visible performance of transformation and manifestation of belonging. Several articles have also examined the representation of emotion and affect resulting from loss of faith or the discovery of a new passion. Another important theme that nearly all the articles tackle is the perceived political significance of personal, spiritual moves. Some life narratives of spiritual transformation, such as those of Shraddhanand and Harichand Thakur (see Singh and Mukherjee), incorporate elements of distinct political leadership of religious sects. Other life narratives conceptualise the spiritual re-fashioning of the self as metonymic of an extensive political reform of 'India' (see Dandekar and Israel). Wakankar comments on the political significance of the 'lowering of Marathi' that the nineteenth-century discourse on conversion made possible in Western India, and possibilities for the articulation of resistance that emerged, against both brahman-dominated Hinduism *and* Christianity. Martinez' demonstration that autobiographical poems in the guise of Mirabai continue to be written and recited to challenge current social and political hierarchies provides an interesting further perspective on these observations.

#### 4. Contributions to this volume

Most of the contributions to this volume were first presented at a workshop held at IIT Delhi in December 2015, entitled "Narratives of Transformation: Language, Conversion, and Indian Traditions of 'Autobiography.'" The workshop was organized by the project team on a collaborative interdisciplinary research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) examining South Asian narratives of religious conversion to Christianity from the eighteenth century onwards, entitled Conversion, Translation and the Language of Autobiography ([from now CTLA] for detail of the project, see <http://www.ctla.llc.ed.ac.uk/>). Our intention was to situate our study of conversion



accounts to Christianity within a broader context in South Asia by including conversion between other religious traditions and historical periods, to give our study historical depth and comparative range across religious cultures. Israel and Mukherjee's contributions were first presented at a panel convened by them at the 22<sup>nd</sup> European Conference on South Asian Studies (2012), entitled, "Of saints, converts, and heroes: hagiographies and conversion auto/biographies across religions in South Asia." Dandekar's contribution was presented at ECSAS 2016 for a panel convened by the project team entitled, "Linguistic Terrains in South Asia: Translation and the Enlargement of Language Cultures." Despite these various conference contexts, the articles in this volume are brought together by their central focus on religious conversion or transformation of one sort or another.

In this volume, three contributions focus on conversion narratives written by converts to Christianity. The narratives of Christian conversion discussed by Dandekar, Frenz and Israel complicate the binary distinctions on which popular understandings of conversion work. All three also highlight the effects of the translation of narratives across Indian languages or into English and/or German. Dandekar's article examines the narrative of the conversion of the Bengali Bala Shundoree Tagore, written in English by a missionary, subsequently re-worked into a different narrative by a female missionary and then translation into Marathi by an Indian, himself a convert to Christianity. Dandekar argues that although Bala the female convert remains silenced, each re-construction of the conversion story offers a progressively gendered perspective and therefore participates in distinctly different projects of reform that the three biographers are interested in. Figuring initially as a proper wife in the Bengali Bhadra mahila context, next as innocent child, Dandekar contends that Bala finally transitions into a 'Swadeshi Christian woman' through the use of bhakti tropes and imagery introduced into the Marathi translation. Frenz compares three versions of the nineteenth-century conversion narrative of Anandrao Kaundinya (1825-1893). Anandrao seems to have authored the German version soon after his conversion and an English version after several years with significant shifts in the emotional registers between the two. Frenz argues that for Anandrao to have been ordained minister in Germany and returned as celebrated missionary and powerful agent of Protestant mission to India, his conversion story needed to manifest 'truth' in a compelling manner. Using Foucault's formulation of *alèthurgie* or manifestations of truth, Frenz

examines four 'procedures' that manifest truth in Anandrao's narratives: confession, emotion, habit and language. Frenz also demonstrates that Anandrao's narratives work differently in each language to establish his conversion as genuine and legitimate. Israel examines several conversion narratives to investigate the function of memory and translation in re-constructing conversion and participating in the wider debates on social and religious reform in nineteenth-century India. She argues that realist narrative devices are employed by the converts to display their transition from a naïve, irrational child to mature and rational Protestant adulthood through the repeated and public act of confessional memory and writing. In doing so, these conversion narratives also seek to prove that the converted self has reformed sufficiently to re-organise and reform the communities within which they locate themselves. The life writings on conversions to Christianity discussed by the three contributors thus complicate the way narratives of Christian conversion have been interpreted as tracking esoteric spiritual transformation to show how these narratives enter into complex negotiations with competing cultural regimes.

Martinez and Mukherjee examine popular manifestations of faith transformation as alternatives to mainstream Hindu practice, albeit in different historical periods. Martinez examines the "autobiographical pose" that is adopted in north India by popular renderings of devotional poetry attributed to the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Bhakti poet-saint Mirabai. She argues that rather than attempt to identify 'authentic' autobiographical poems of Mirabai, examining why the autobiographical voice of Mirabai was adopted by so many other anonymous writers in subsequent historical periods is more valuable. She suggests that the poetry of such autobiographical posing not only allows generations of women to identify with Mira the poet-saint but also through this act effectively claim spiritual authority and experience to critique ongoing oppressive religious and social inequalities. Mukherjee analyses several editions of the hagiography of Harichand Thakur, who founded the Matua dharma as a challenge to Brahmanical Hinduism in nineteenth-century Bengal. Mukherjee argues that this text is key to the community's social and political aspirations as they develop over a century, enabling them to negotiate their caste position in the hierarchy. Ironically, despite the founder-saint's dismissal of Brahmanical traditions, his hagiography is composed in verse reminiscent of Vaishnava texts. The religious and poetic registers of

Bengali Vaishnavism give the hagiography its ambiguous quality in rejecting yet appropriating Vaisnava idiom, thereby undermining its founder's teachings. Yet this very ambiguity serves future generations of the sect by offering sufficient leeway to negotiate a higher lineage for their founder and to re-position itself in relation to the Hindu community at different points. Mukherji's linking of the textual permutations of the community's key narrative with its rising political clout in the context of late-twentieth century party politics of Bengal is a good example of how narratives of individual transformation are often appropriated by entire communities to construct new identities.

This connection between individual narratives and the developing identity of a community is similarly apparent in Singh's study of the autobiography of Swami Shraddhanand, published in 1924. Singh demonstrates how Shraddhanand was acutely conscious of his responsibility as a leading member of the Arya Samaj to produce models for living and sources of inspiration for the emerging community of Aryas, both mirroring and supplementing the foundational texts of the founder Swami Dayananda. The autobiography narrates the early life of Shraddhanand, his 'conversion' to the Arya Samaj and the early years of his life as a member of this incipient religious community. In its shape and reflective tone, this account echoes the life-writing genre explored by Dandekar, Frenz and Israel, deeply influenced by the new public spaces of colonial Christianity. This account is distinctive, however, both because it does not involve conversion to Christianity, and because it is written in Hindi, a language where even when Shraddhanand was writing there were few vernacular models for autobiographical writing. The genre exists in tension with what Singh identifies as a kind of civilizational resistance, where Shraddhanand develops his sense of self in the framework a strongly-wrought concept of indigenous culture, valorised in contradistinction to the encroachment of colonialism. Here then we see an echo of the very anxieties that emerge in the development of Hindu nationalist antipathies towards conversion, where the boundaries of religious identity, fashioned under the influence of epistemological domination, are fused to the trope of indigeneity. In contrast, Wakankar's study of the Marathi public sphere of the late nineteenth century exemplifies a form of resistance to that inexorably developing trajectory. Wakankar demonstrates in particular how the low caste activist Jotiba Phule articulates a critique of Brahmanism whilst simultaneously resisting the saturating modernity of Christianity that had, by that time,

colonised the space of critique. Wakankar argues that the power of conversion, in this context, is its projection of a movement of transformation away from Hinduism-as-religion, cast as a welter of proud and foolish, caste-ridden superstitions, towards a form of effacing modern subjecthood, articulated through the idiom of a humble Marathi language, fashioned in colonial public sphere. Phule shows the way towards a different kind of modern subjecthood, by using this language whilst at the same time resisting the seductive transition through conversion to the modern non-religion of Christianity. This is what Wakankar describes as ‘fluent speech’, a capacity born of Phule’s social positioning and low caste consciousness, through which he rejects brahminism as religion, drawing on but not succumbing to Christianity as its antithesis. In this critical narrative of low caste *non*-conversion, then, we see the shaping of different ways of imagining the present in the modern vernacular – ways which again allow us to reflect on the social positioning of conversion, this power-full act, in the developing narratives of modern India.

Overall, the special issue illuminates how individual, personal narratives are remembered through a series of selective actions—writing, publishing, translating, reading and remembering—that serve to construct collective narratives. Conversion accounts have fulfilled a dual purpose for South Asian communities across the religious spectrum, both to construct an account of themselves and those of others, and point to what it meant for each community at specific historical points to be identified as devotees of a particular god or guru. In contemporary India, some of these conversion narratives are forgotten and others remembered, frequently in order to assist in the cleansing of unwanted, ‘anti-national’ divinities and their communities. The special issue to a large extent punctures the political potency of such selective acts of remembering, by deconstructing the role of literary representation in the discursive constructions of religious identities in conversion narratives across historical time periods and religious traditions. It therefore constitutes a timely intervention in relation to the current political focus on conversion in the South Asian context. The persistent claims that only some religions actively seek to convert and thereby pose a threat to religious freedom and individual sovereignty while others are intrinsically tolerant and inclusive of all faiths is challenged by each contribution.